
Secondary Observation as a Method of Social Media Research: Theoretical Considerations and Implementation*

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to present the methods of conducting research in the social media, with a detailed reference to the method of observation and the analysis of secondary data. By indicating the methodology of methods analysed, the author translated them into opportunities of the environment within which observation is made, i.e. social media. Moreover, the author drew her attention to the necessity of pointing at the source used in the observation, through proper definition of the method. Then, the application of the proposed research method defined as the secondary observation was presented based on the example of profiles of the companies from ICT industry in Facebook and Instagram.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The presented research constitutes the third part of the research project in which the described research method was applied. First, the analysis of literature was performed (desk research). Then, surveys were conducted among entities being subject to research. After classification of the areas of interest and definition of the methods, the last stage consisted in own research carried out by the author with the use of the research method proposed - by secondary observation.

Findings: On the basis of the analysis of literature, the author stated the absence of a defined and qualified research method of social media based on the analysis of existing data. Research made using the proposed method showed how it was implemented and an example of interpretation of the results.

Practical Implications: Practical implication arising out of this article is the possibility of using the aforementioned method by researchers to conduct own research in the social media.

Originality/value: The article contributes to reference literature in form of the defined research method and a well-defined method of conducting research in the social media in the areas proposed. Moreover, it may determine the direction of extending the scope of application of the method described.

Keywords: Methodology, method by researchers, analysis, ICT, desk research.

JEL codes: M00, M39.

Paper type: Theoretical - review article.

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1. Introduction

Andrew Pickering, one of influential scientific sociologists, science today evolves not under the influence of great scientific upheavals but as a result of technological revolutions (Pickering, 1994). The history of marketing research dates back to the Middle Ages. Their formal form began to be implemented in the first half of the 19th century. Its massive development took place after World War II (Kaczmarczyk, 2011). In Poland, the period of research development took place along with a significant time shift. The conditions of centralised economy that existed after the war did not require professional collection of the information supporting companies in making market decisions. The change took place at the beginning of the 1990s along with the emergence of conditions conducive to the development of market economy (Kędzior and Jaciow, 2004). This period is treated as a beginning of a dynamic development of marketing research in Poland. Along with the change of conditions, the demand of Polish entrepreneurs for gaining and using the information, development of the industry, development of new research methods and development of quality standards for their implementation began to grow (Eschert, 2014).

The Internet has unprecedentedly extended the possibility of access to knowledge, the possibility of spreading and presenting the results. In the opinion of many scientists, research disciplines, including their respective methodologies, develop thanks to new tools (Barabasi, 2018; Szpunar, 2018). Through the development of technology, they become the main factor in the transformation of methodology. They function in the Internet or outside it. They ensure implementation of research processes, such as collection of data, their analysis or visualisation. However, it should be remembered that the Internet is a collection of inexhaustible social and cultural data. It is worth noting however that even the most advanced technology will not replace the explanation and understanding of this huge collection of data offered on the Internet (Szpunar, 2018). A “researcher’s eye” is indispensable; upon the use of the appropriate research tools the researcher will analyse the data and draw relevant research conclusions. Couper also notices that the change in the traditional social science workshop is a consequence of development of research techniques via the Internet (Couper, 2000). Therefore, it seems important to look at new opportunities on the Internet from the point of view of methodology of social science and its use in the world of virtual tests.

2. Literature Review

It is many times in the publications on the methodology of networks research that M. Szpunar draws attention to the need of making basic distinction between the research concerning the Internet itself. He points at methodological aspects and the need of adapting already known research techniques to the interactive environment. Moreover, he draws his attention to the need of developing new, specific research

tools (more in the publications by Szpunar, 2007-2011). In the past ten years, various tools and techniques have been developed, using the Internet to conduct research, the object of which can be completely unrelated to the Internet (Couper, 2000). Therefore, there is a growing interest in this medium as a tool for social and psychological research (Batorski, Olcon, and Kubicka 2006).

The authors of the report entitled ‘Using social media for social research: An introduction Social Media Research Group,’ May 2016 said “Given the variety and potential size of social media data, new and dynamic approaches to existing quantitative and qualitative research techniques are being developed”. They identified 18 qualitative and quantitative methods used in the research in the social media – Table 1.

Table 1. *Social Media Methodology Spectrum.*

QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE		
Units of volume and frequency Number of followers/friends Number of users Rates of use and interaction Searches Number of reactions Views Comments Likes/endorsements Retweets/Quotes Volumes per unit time Scores/Other Ordinal Rankings Deletions	Biographical data Age, Name, Gender Nationality, Residence Occupation or qualifications Lifestyle activities or interests Location Latitude / Longitude Settlement/Address Textual Semantics Keyword content from posts comments on primary posts Hashtags Influencing Patterns of reaction	Visual and Audio content Photo tags Media tone and content Tone and Sentiment Emotions and feelings Tone and opinion Influence and Clout Topics of discussion/search
ASSOCIATED SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS		
Regression Modelling GIS Correlation and ANOVA Descriptive Statistical Tests	Network Analysis Semantic Analysis GIS Pseudo-Experiments	Semantic Analysis and Thematic Codification Ethnographic Observation Active Research

Source: GSR. *Social Media Research Group May 2016.*

As we can see, many categories of research find their place in the social media, starting from quantitative and experimental but also qualitative research which deal with online studies of the communities created around blogs, chats, forums and mailing lists.

Some authors conduct their studies on the same data in the social media and use ethnographic research (Jemielniak, 2019), the others choose the observation method (Hine 2000; Jones 1997; Rheingold 1994; Turkle, 1995), while the others conduct desk research analysis (Makowska, 2013, Bednarowska, 2015). Hence, it is crucial to indicate the methodology for individual types and to indicate whether those

methods are related to each other, or whether they can interpenetrate or supplement each other.

The literature shows that in the case of online studies the observation is often associated with ethnography, which is defined by numerous researchers in various ways. From the point of view of its research area in the Internet we can encounter, among other things, the Internet ethnography” (Sade-Beck, 2008), “virtual space ethnography” (Guitton, 2012), digital ethnography (Murthy, 2008) or online “ethnography” (Markham, 2008). In view of the foregoing, observation is treated as a method used in ethnographic studies which takes a stationary form. It is used to conduct a case study during which research logs are kept in the form of field notes. Therefore, the author points out that in the case of on-line observation, the form supporting the keeping of notes comprises entries put on the walls of a given profile. Its best observation environment includes social profiles such as Facebook, which provide recording continuity, its archive, the possibility of free expression in the text, graphic, sound form or in the form of emoticons. Later, the article shows differences of treating online observation as a leading method or a method supported by other research methods, not complementary to ethnographic studies.

The author will refer in her considerations to two research methods of observation and the desk research analysis. These are methods used quite frequently by the scientists, but there is no clear definition of methodology of this type of research and its clarification in the context of nomenclature. The thesis was made research in the social media may take the form of observation focused on secondary data. In order to prove the thesis, the author looked at the characteristics and methodology of both of these methods with reference to the virtual world, translating it at the same time into a digital space of their implementation, i.e. the social media.

Many authors deal with and apply the observation method (Baker, 2006; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2001; Kempny and Nowicka, 2004; Sokolewicz, 1974; Whyte and Whyte, 1984, Stankiewicz, 2011; Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey, 2011, Silverman 2011, Afeltowicz, 2012; Bińczyk and Derra, 2014). In the case of offline observation, its characteristics and methodologies are defined. The observations are the “process of careful and purposeful perception which constitutes a part of the methods of scientific inquiry. It is also specific gathering as well as interpretation of in-depth data in their natural course, when they are in the direct field of vision and hearing of the observer.” (Cybulska, 2013). Considering the organisation method, observations are classified as follows (Sztumski, 2004; Babbie, 2008; Johanson and Reynolds, 2011):

- (1) direct or indirect observation,
- (2) participating or non-participating observation,
- (3) open or hidden observation,
- (4) structured or non-structured observation,

(5) controlled or uncontrolled observation.

Referring to the observation of social media channels, they can take a form of direct observation. According to Jemielniak (2019), using the direct form we can observe interactions in the real time which enables us to gain knowledge about the dynamics of conversation. However, according to the author, due to the need of regular tracking of changes, it would require us to register the entire 24/7 communication, while referring to the other channels to which the discussion could be moved. In order not to lose any important thread, it would be necessary to make a recording using the additional device which, unfortunately, could not make transfer between the channels.

Therefore, the author is of the opinion that despite the loss of such advantages of this form, the direct method can provide a lot of interesting information providing data for the analysis. Thanks to permanent records arranged chronologically, which are archived on the wall of a given profile, it is possible to recreate the dynamics of the discussion. It will require greater involvement and attention; however, it makes us feel confident that a significant number of conversations has been saved (with the exception of records deleted during the discussion). In addition, it also gives a possibility of returning to a given event and date once there is a need to recall the event. On its basis we can supplement the information we have gathered in the observation log, which is still the main source of observations. In her observations, the author applied an indirect form as part of which she follows entries registered on the wall of a given social medium, e.g. Facebook, and then she records her own reflections in the observation matrix created for the purpose of the research. When participating, the observer can join the discussions being conducted or trigger communication himself/herself. Moreover, the observer can follow the messages put by the other observers of a given profile.

Analysing the form of structure in the scope of data already registered the form is acceptable. In the case of conversations held at a given moment, it is difficult to predict clearly to which direction the discussion will go or what data will be put. Only the owner of the profile can control it, therefore, in the case of social media it will be mainly uncontrolled observation. It is also worth noting that the observation is deemed to be a qualitative method, however,

Sztumski notes that using it, the researcher tries to describe both facts he/she can see and to classify their observations to some extent, as a result of which he/she determines their intensity, frequency, activity, features etc., (Sztumski, 2004). The author draws her attention to this since during the observations carried out in the social media, specified indicators are also considered in order to maintain better evaluation of phenomena analysed or changes taking place.

The observation time is defined as continuous, in the case of profile observation specific observation time can be assumed that will provide the necessary research material. Its time will depend on the frequency of publications and the changes observed in the scope of communication forms used, as well as the assessment of the intensity of the discussion.

Nowadays the observation can constitute an independent research method, but nevertheless quite often it supplements or is supported by other research method (e.g. interviews, ethnographic research) which provide the additional information (Olejniki, 2013). The author also believes that in the case of observation of social media it is worth using other studies that will ensure a broader picture of the analysed topic. As far as the supporting methods are concerned, surveys or interviews are recommended with the representatives of the entity under examination. As with the duration of the observation, the method is selected on the basis of additional factors, i.e. the researcher's knowledge of the topic, the scope of the research or the level of information that can be obtained during the observation.

The Internet is both an opportunity to produce the information and to draw from a large repository of desk research data. As already mentioned, the activities connected with observation and with conducting discussions are extended in other methods and techniques of obtaining scientifically useful information, especially in the study of the archives of a given community understood as desk research data (Bukowski, 2018).

In the social sciences, the analysis of desk research data aims at the analysis and processing of data coming from the existing sources, archived, coming from other authors from their research projects (Hinds, Vogel, Clarke, and Steffen, 1997; Corti and Thompson, 2007; Bartnikowska, Ćwirynkało, and Makowska, 2013; Bednarowski, 2015; Borowska-Beszta, 2017). Then these data are transformed in the information on the basis of which conclusions are drawn about the problem under examination. Secondary research is contrasted with primary research. Primary research is understood as generation of data while secondary research uses primary research as a source of the analysed data. In the case of the methodology, there is no defined duration or implementation phase. Data collection and mining continues throughout the duration of a given research project. This is due to the fact that the data are constantly supplemented and compiled with the materials obtained at an earlier stage of the study (Makowska, 2013). Numerous authors point to numerous primary sources that can become data for the secondary analyses, e.g. there are "interviews, field work logs, notes from the observation, corporate databases, personal documents, publications, balance sheets and financial reports, photographs, both in the digital and paper form (printed or manuscripts), audio, video or photographic form (Corti and Thompson, 2007).

In the case of the Internet, sources include websites of the enterprises, scientific articles on the Internet or the Internet forums (Bednarowska, 2015). Hence, another question arises whether while using the analysis of the desk research data with a different research method, it should be indicated when describing its source. The author is of the opinion that in order to emphasize the source of the observations made, the name of the observation should be extended and defined as a secondary observation. The following part of the article presents a case study of the proposed method.

3. Research Methodology

As part of continuation of the analysis of the topic related to the application and use of social media in the ICT industry, the author undertook further research based on the conclusions that arose on the basis of extensive literature and previous research analyses. Based on the observed and previously analysed group of innovative ICT companies, three companies were selected for the purpose of ex-post analysis. The selection was based on a specific criterion, i.e. "the assumption of given entities to introduce changes / improvements in the field of operation in social media".

Persons representing a given enterprise included marketing specialists, persons responsible for communication activities or for communication with the clients. The selection of companies was deliberate, ensuring the possibility of comparing the answers in terms of the nature of the company's operations as well as the knowledge and competence of the interviewees. In order to keep one direction and maintain research assumptions as well as a more precise and orderly data collection, the interview was conducted based on the research scenario. More detailed research methodology and its results have been described in the publication entitled "Qualitative research methods in the process of development of product innovation development and the possibilities of using social media." (Słupińska and Szwałik, 2018).

The proposed secondary observation was applied as a research method used in the analysis of selected entities. This method allows the observation of respondents' behaviours in real environment, which ensures authenticity and greater objectivity. The main social media channels used by the enterprises being examined served as the sites of the analysis.

The social networks, i.e., Facebook and Instagram were taken under secret observation. The choice of channels was dictated by the profiles held by given companies. As each portals, websites or blogs enable the assessment of communication activities to a different extent, hence separate assumptions were made for each channel and its tools. The lead time of research and analyses was established for the period between September 1 and October 21, 2018. In addition,

reference was made to some information contained on the official websites of the companies, as part of the relation to the analysed area.

The observation was of a non-participating and hidden nature. In the case of Facebook, the observation included statistical analyses such as: the time of publishing the content, the number of likes, comments, shares and qualitative forms of communication used, the analysis of commenting users' reactions, the segment analysis. Thanks to the adopted criteria, the profile management method could be analysed, on the basis of which the partial verification of the thesis was made. In the case of Instagram, the following elements of the quantitative analysis were used: frequency of publications, the number of likes, and the qualitative analysis – the analysis of the form of communication and the resulting reaction, the segment analysis.

For the purpose of the analysis, the author prepared observation matrix into which conclusions of the research were entered. With help of the research conducted, the author wanted to verify the planned activity declared. During the observation, she analysed the method and forms of building the message, assessing the effectiveness of its delivery, the way of building engagement among a specific group of stakeholders and how these activities translate into the process of image management.

4. Results and Discussion

At the beginning, as part of the research, the author checked what types of messages were sent by companies and to whom they are primarily sent, and then she determined their percentage share in the entire category of messages built. As part of further analyses, the author verified how the image management process is carried out in the Internet - whether the activities are carried out systematically or whether the process is carried out sporadically and how it translates into users' activity. In Table 2, areas (categories) implemented by the enterprises as part of Facebook and Instagram were presented.

As we can observe in the case of the first company, the activities are focused on the presentation of the product and purchasing incentives used, promotional activities - the presentation of one's activity as part of the events and activities aimed at engaging the community / the existing customers or opinion leaders - an attempt to include them in the promotion of the product. The messages are focused on external recipients, primarily potential customers - the product and its functionalities as well as potential partners are shown - presentations of the company's active participation in the organized events. Image messages created in cooperation with the network community can also be distinguished - both the material received from them or created with their participation. This is the third category of messages as part of which the company tries to engage its existing customers by showing the company

as the entity listening to "the voice of its consumers" and taking their opinion into account. Reports on the product testing, as well as competition works in which their customers participated and won are presented. This encourages them to communicate with each other and share the published content. The activities presented enable to build a consistent image of the company, but they are not as clearly outlined as in the case of the second and third company. In these companies, the enterprise itself acts as the main force in image building, while the network community is included in selected activities.

Table 2. Areas (categories) implemented by the enterprises as part of Facebook and Instagram.

	Company 1	Company 2	Company 3
Facebook	Three leading publication categories: Product presentation, shopping incentives product presentation and information about its functionality, discount codes Promotional activities participation and organization of events Engaging the community testing the product by users, videos from customers, encouraging them to participate in competitions, publishing materials obtained from the network community, using a famous person	Two leading publication categories: Integration atmosphere at work, the life of employees from the "kitchen", participation in training Recruitment publication of job offers, information on preferred requirements for candidates and among other supplementary ones incl. information about implemented projects Other materials not related to any specific category, photos ect.	Three leading publication categories: Sharing knowledge: educating, advising Promotional activities: presentation of participation in various events, both in which the company presents itself and to which it is invited Integration presentation of the other side of the job plus incentives to recruit for the company
Instagram	Two leading publication categories Promotional activities e.g. contest, participation in events Product presentation information about its functionality and possibility	One leading publication categories Integration Profile focused on the life of employees at work and after work, but from the "kitchen", showing a good atmosphere, a well-coordinated team - a positive image from the point of view of employees	Two leading publication categories: Integration: joint activities, working from the "kitchen" from the employees' point of view Promotional activities incl. participation in events

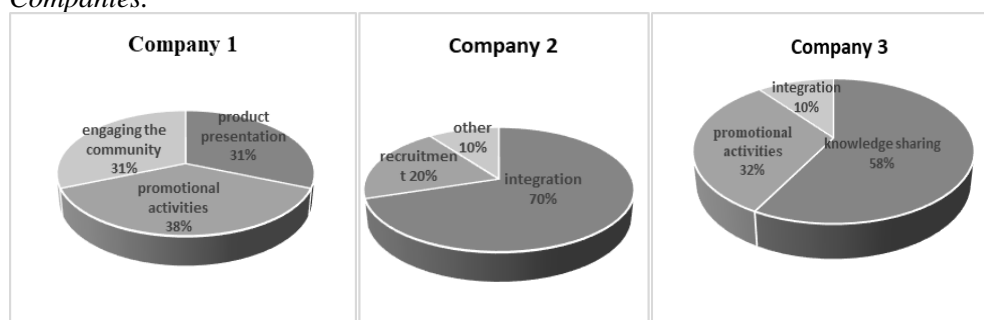
Source: Own survey.

In the case of the second company analyses, the activities are focused on the employee, showing their life at work, activities for the company and their joint activities after work, e.g. team integration. The second aspect presented by the company refers to recruitment. It is done not only by showing the job offer itself, but also by pointing to the benefits of taking the job - focus on the employee and the employee's development. These are, in conjunction with the previous category, complementary elements presenting the company in a positive light. The other messages show the activities carried out by the company, indicate its activity, which gives the impression of dynamic development of the company.

The third company adopted the strategy of presenting itself as being open to the community and potential customers interested in the area they deal with. Through on-line trainings, it shares its knowledge, educates, and gives advice, creating thereby the image of an experienced and recommendable entity. The other category of messages comprises materials dedicated to the promotion of the company focused on potential partners – showing its activity as part of various events in which they participate or which they conduct. The third category of activities is connected with recruitment, focused on potential candidates. Similarly, to the second of the companies analysed, the enterprise tries to guide a candidate how a given person should prepare for the recruitment process and indicate what kind of persons are preferred in the team.

As part of the activities in individual social media channels, a variety of approaches (focus on different audience groups) to the possibility of using social media as an image goal can be seen. The process of message management, however, is not systematic (especially in the case of the first and the second company), and sometimes it has a more random nature. The analyses conducted showed what type of messages in the analysed period, i.e. from September 1 to October 21, 2018 (in the case of the second company from June 1 to October 21, 2018) was used by the analysed enterprises (detailed division is presented in Figure 2).

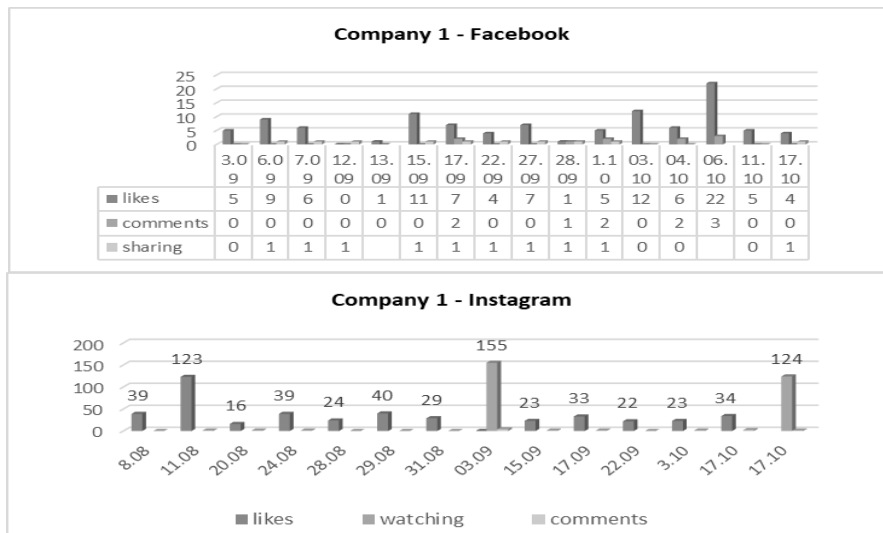
Figure 2. *Percentage share of the activities applied in Facebook by the analysed Companies.*



Source: Own survey.

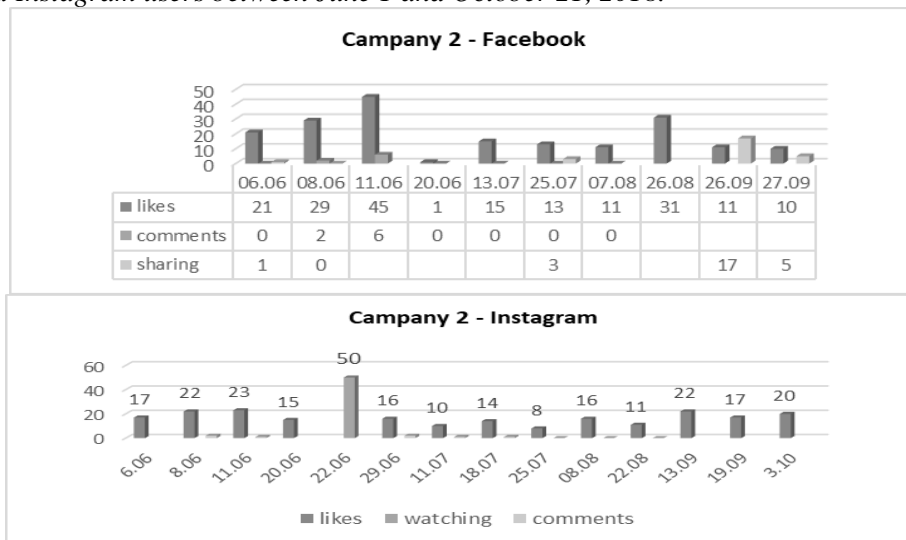
The authors also decided to check whether the level of activity and systematicity of publications of the analysed companies translates significantly into involvement of the community. Figures 3, 4, 5 present detailed statements.

Figure 3. *Company 1 - Publishing activity of company 1 involvement of Facebook and Instagram users between June 1 and October 21, 2018.*



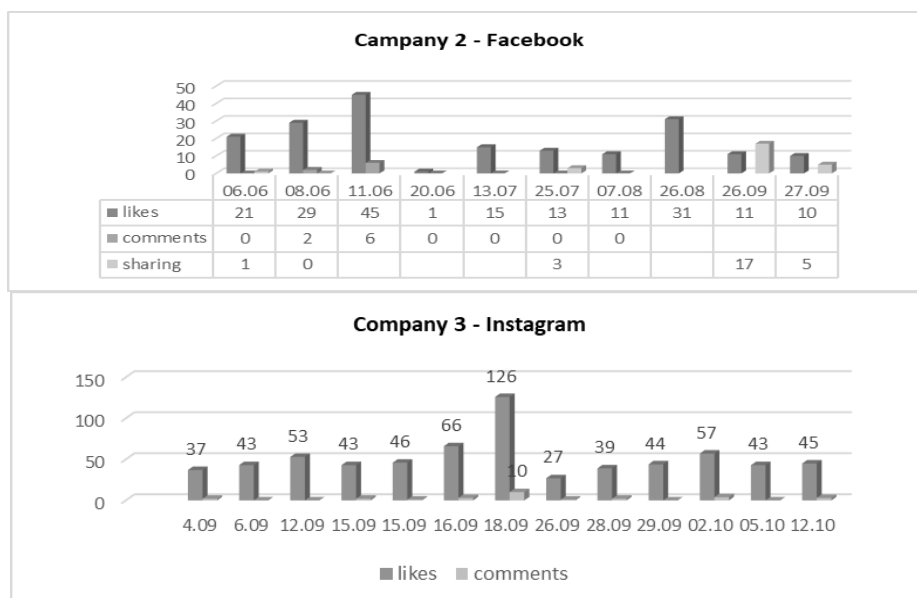
Source: Own survey.

Figure 4. *Company 2 - Publishing activity of company 2 involvement of Facebook and Instagram users between June 1 and October 21, 2018.*



Source: Own survey.

Figure 5. Company 3 - Publishing activity of company 3 involvement of Facebook and Instagram users between September 1 and October 21, 2018.



Source: Own survey.

On the basis of the results presented, we can conclude that a higher degree of systematicity is not a guideline that determines the activity of its users, but nevertheless it enables to maintain a constant group of followers and those engaging in a given profile. Moreover, when comparing the statement of activities implemented it can be stated that when the social media are engaged in the activities of building the image aimed at employees, they achieved much greater activity expressed by the number of likes, comments, shares, likes or views.

As it could be observed in relation to the declared activities that companies assumed to implement since the interviews conducted in 2017, the difference was remarkable. The third of the analysed companies noticed the richness of the possibilities of individual social media channels to a greater extent and uses them differently to communicate with target groups

The author treated the method of secondary observation as a method supplementing the research process. As a result, the conducted analyses complemented each other and limited the probability of an error in the conclusions drawn regarding the examined entity. Moreover, they gave a broader picture of the analysed topic. On one hand, direct information from the examined entity, and on the other, indirect, allowing to check the actual feelings about the organization's activities and their application and selection by the segments they want to reach

5. Conclusions

The use of digital tools in the research workshop is not treated as an indicator of a scholar's progressiveness, but rather a natural need to adapt the existing technologies. The universality of data processing in a scientific workshop causes that in a short time all sciences, and thus research methods, will be supported by IT solutions.

The typology of observations does not close the development of the method. Researchers are still developing new solutions using new technologies (observation of chats, blogs, monitoring the use of websites; mobile devices or research of visual and audio-visual materials (Gajda, 2014). It also gives an opportunity to use this method more widely, also in various social channels, such as social networks. Data that can be found in the social media channels are largely archival material, therefore secondary data analysis is in the agenda.

Hence, it becomes important to indicate the source also in the description of the methodology in the form of an appropriate definition of the research method used, which may be, as in the case described above, a combination of methods. The research carried out by the author based on the method of secondary observation provides a wide range of possibilities for extending the scope of the observation, both in terms of quality (e.g. analysis of the forms of messages) and quantity (e.g. measures used). The author will continue to analyse the possibilities of the applied method.

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